NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 548 NEW YORK, JUNE 29, 1907. Price, Five Cents

A DEAD MAN AT THE FEAST

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

"OR" NICK CARTER'S VERY SLENDER CLUE

The next instant Nick flung Bergen over his shoulder and hurled him to the floor like the lash of a whip.

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A DEAD MAN AT THE FEAST;

OR,

Nick Carter's Very Slender Clue.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A DEAD MAN AT THE FEAST.

"I suppose you have heard the news, haven't you?" Patsy inquired, entering the study where Nick Carter was engaged looking over some accounts.

"I am not sure that I have," replied the detective, raising his eyes and smiling. "What is it about, Patsy?"

"Melville Bergen has been admitted to bail—and has jumped his bond. The bond has been declared forfeited, and there is a bench-warrant out for Bergen's arrest."

Nick Carter put aside his papers, and his expression became serious at once.

"When did all this happen?" he asked. "And is there any more that goes with it?"

"It happened this morning when his name was called in court and he did not respond—and there *is* more that goes with it."

"That is what I feared. Is it—has it anything to do with Imogene Mallory?"

"It has everything to do with her. She has disappeared with him."

"You are positive about this, Patsy?"

"Certainly. I have just been to inquire for her."

"Do you know *when* all this happened?"

"Only approximately. Bergen was admitted to bail three days ago. At first some sort of watch was kept upon him, as it was feared that he might decide to jump his bond. But as he manifested no signs of such an intention, the watch was relaxed. It is supposed that he made his escape during the early part of the day yesterday. Nothing is known about it for certain."

"But what about Imogene?"

"Imogene left the house where she has been staying, soon after breakfast yesterday morning. She went, ostensibly, to do some shopping in the early part of the day before the stores became crowded. She has not returned."

"Do you know if she had received any message from Bergen?"

"No; I do not know about that. But after all the protestations she made to you, it is not consistent, is it, that she would pay any attention to such a message if she should have received one?"

The detective was thoughtful.

"I am not sure about that," he replied presently. "Imo-

gene Mallory was a peculiar combination of weakness and strength. Her impulses were always good, but she was nevertheless easily led into evil. We must not forget that Melville Bergen—or Birge, as she always called him, is really her husband. The fact that she repudiated him after that scene wherein she was about to commit bigamy by becoming the wife of Clarence Vaughan, does not alter the fact at all. And, moreover, notwithstanding the undoubted villainy of Bergen, she loved him."*

"Then," said Patsy, "it is your opinion, is it, that she has gone away with him voluntarily?"

"It is, and again it is not."

"That is rather an ambiguous statement, isn't it, chief?"

"Yes. What I mean is this: She left the house where she has been living yesterday morning, you say."

"Yes."

"It is my opinion that they met somewhere outside the house. Either it was an accidental encounter, pure and simple, or he had been watching for her—watching for just such an opportunity. Once he *had* met her—once she had fallen again under his influence, she would have been like putty in his hands."

"The district attorney's office wants you to find him again."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"I think I shall wash my hands of the entire affair now," he said. "The district attorney should have opposed Bergen's admission to bail—or failing that, should have insisted upon having it fixed so high that it could not have been found for him. I don't believe that I care to have anything more to do with the matter."

"Doesn't it occur to you," asked Patsy, with rather remarkable insistence, "that Imogene may be in some danger?"

"Yes," replied Nick coolly, "I have no doubt that she *is* in danger; but, on the other hand, if she has gone into danger, she has done it with her eyes wide open. I think, Patsy, that I will adhere to my statement. I think that I will decline to have anything more to do with the case."

"Then, may I ask if you would object if *I* should take it up on my own hook?"

The detective raised his eyes in some surprise.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. "No, Patsy, if you feel that you would really like to take the case, I will give you leave of absence to do so. But I would like to have you tell me why you care to do so."

"It is just because I feel sorry for that girl—no more, no less. Ten-Ichi feels the same way that I do about it. We have discussed the matter, and we have decided that Bergen means to kill her if he cannot—well, as you said a moment ago, mold her to his will as he would shape a lump of putty in his hands."

"Am I to understand that Ten-Ichi wishes also to be excused, in order to take up this matter? Do I understand that you and Ten-Ichi wish to work together on the case?"

"Exactly that, chief, if you have no objections—and there is nothing else that you prefer we should do, just now."

"No; there is nothing. Chick will be at home this evening. You and Ten-Ichi may have your heads, Patsy."

"For how long a time?"

"Why, until you complete your case, of course."

"That is awfully good of you, chief. We both appreciate it, I assure you."

"You must remember this, however, Patsy. If you two get tied up anywhere—if you run up against any obstacle which seems too great for you, let me know at once. Chick and I will be ready at any time to go to your assistance—and it wouldn't surprise me at all if you should discover a little later that you have a hard proposition to handle."

"We both realize that."

"Melville Bergen is a man of many resources; he is also a fearless man. He is adept at disguises; he is without a conscience and a heart. Moreover, he has money in plenty—so be on your guard and look out for him."

"We'll do that."

"Another thing."

"Well?"

"Don't forget for a moment that Imogene Mallory Bergen is not to be trusted where her emotions are concerned. She is a brilliant and a beautiful young woman—but she is two-sided. She has a good side and a bad side."

"I know."

"Her natural impulses are good. If she could have her choice of things, her character would be as beautiful as her face—but, on the other hand, under the influence of Birge, she would not hesitate to commit almost any crime, provided he commanded her, or even asked her to do so."

"I realize that also."

"She would not hesitate, at his direction, to lure you into all sorts of tight places—and on one occasion, you will remember, she succeeded in fooling me completely by that witchery of hers."

"I remember only too well."

Patsy started to take his leave, but his chief detained him.

"The time of Imogene's disappearance is fixed at yesterday morning, you say. That would give them, if they are together—and there can be no doubt of that—approximately thirty-six hours' start. I think, if I were going to begin the search for them, I should make my first

* See No. 150 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "A Mystery of Two Passengers."

inquiries around the steamship offices—and I should lose no time about it either."

"You think that Bergen would make for Europe?"

"I think it would be his idea to get out of the country—although I may be entirely wrong about that. By the way——"

"Yes, sir?"

The detective was silent a moment, and then he said:

"I was wondering if it would not be a good idea for one of you to make a call upon my friend, Clarence Vaughan. I have a sort of idea that they haven't let up on him yet. Vaughan is a good fellow and rather a clever fellow, but all the same it is worth while to remember that he was madly in love with Imogene, at that time when she was playing him for his millions."

"But after the expose——"

"I don't think he really believed it; or, if he did, he might now be convinced that a divorce could be procured, and that after that he could secure Imogene for his wife. Wait a minute, Patsy. I haven't anything particular to do just now. You and I will go at once to make a call on Vaughan. What time is it? Five o'clock? We should catch him at his bachelor apartment just about now. Come!"

The detective and his assistant were soon in the street together, and as the distance to the bachelor apartment-house where Clarence Vaughan made his home was not great, they decided to walk. At five-thirty they entered the building.

Going at once to the desk, the detective inquired:

"Can you tell me if Mr. Vaughan is in his apartment?"

"I believe so, sir," replied the clerk. "I don't think he has been out at all this afternoon."

"Isn't that rather unusual for him?" asked Nick.

"Yes, sir; it is. Mr. Vaughan had some people to luncheon with him to-day—a lady and a gentleman. Luncheon was served for them in the apartment. The lady and the gentleman went away about three, but Mr. Vaughan did not come down with them. I have not seen him at all since that time, so I have no doubt he is at home now, sir. I think you may go right up."

Somehow this reply and the explanation that went with it made the detective vaguely uneasy, and with a "Come along, Patsy!" he turned quickly away to the elevator.

Vaughan's apartment was located on the fifth floor of the building. Nick had visited it many times and knew the location perfectly.

Arrived at the door, he pressed the electric button and waited.

There was no response, and he repeated the operation—with the same result.

"Patsy," he said, turning to his assistant, "go downstairs and get the manager of the building. Bring him here quietly, with a pass-key, so that we may enter. Hurry, now. It was Bergen and Imogene who lunched with him to-day, without a doubt, and if——"

But Patsy was already on his way; and in a very short time he returned, accompanied by the manager.

The door was quickly opened. They passed at once through the private hallway, and so entered the principal room of the apartment.

There in the middle of it was the table which had been sumptuously arranged for a luncheon for three. It was still resplendent with all its fittings—and there was one chair that was still occupied.

Clarence Vaughan was there, leaning forward, with his face buried in his arms upon the table, as if he were sleeping.

But he was quite dead, and the body was almost cold.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF A LUNCHEON-PARTY.

The manager of the apartment-house threw up both hands and uttered a cry of consternation. He would have rushed forward had not the detective detained him.

"Remain where you are!" ordered the detective sternly. "Keep your wits about you, too. I must have a little look around here before we admit others to this grim secret."

He stepped still closer to the silent guest at the feast and bent over him. At once the odor of bitter almonds assailed his nostrils—and the odor of bitter almonds at such a scene as that one can mean nothing else than prussic acid.

"It is probably a suicide," was Nick's thought; and as if in mute evidence of this theory, a tiny vial rested upon the table, almost at the elbow of the dead man. Nick raised it and smelled of it—and discovered that there could be no doubt that it had held the poison.

He turned to the manager again.

"Mr. Ring," he said, "if you like, I will relieve you of present responsibility in this matter. I know that you managers do not like it to become known that a suicide or a murder has been committed in a house that happens to be under your charge."

"No, sir; we do not. But how can you relieve me of the responsibility? I don't understand."

"I will ask you to leave that pass-key with me, and then to return quietly to your work below. I will ask you also to say nothing whatever, for the present at least, concerning what we have discovered, and I will send my assistant in person to the coroner, instead of calling him over the telephone."

"But the police——"

"The coroner and the police must both be notified, of course. If we notify the coroner first, we are on the safe side—and I am sufficiently a police officer for the emergency. Besides, as you know, Mr. Vaughan was my friend."

"Yes, sir."

"I will remain here in this room and make some investigations while my assistant goes after the coroner, who fortunately does not live far away. In that manner we can have the incident hushed as much as possible."

"Thank you, sir. It is a case of suicide, of course?"

"It would seem so," was the non-committal response.

"And yet, Mr. Carter, Mr. Clarence Vaughan was the last man in the world whom you would select for a suicide."

"I quite agree with you there, Mr. Ring."

"If you need me you will send for me?"

"Certainly. We will want you here when the coroner comes. Now, Patsy, will you bring the doctor here as soon as you can?"

"And if he is not at home?"

"I think he will be there at this hour; but if he is not, follow him and find him and bring him here. Don't trust to messengers or to the telephone. I don't want this thing to get out at all until I have personally seen the coroner. Go, now, both of you."

In another moment the detective was alone in the apartment with the dead man.

"Poor old chap!" said Nick aloud, regarding rather tenderly the body of the man in the chair. He had known Vaughan many years; never intimately, but always fairly well—a man who had possessed a fortune of several millions and who had always used it liberally, though not unwisely.

Nick took one of the chairs from against the wall and drew it half-way out into the room near the side of the table opposite the body of Vaughan. For reasons of his own he did not care to disturb any of the chairs that were *at* the table.

There were three of those—two that were vacant, and one that was occupied so gruesomely.

Of the two that were vacant, one was shoved back, as a chair would likely be whose occupant had risen hastily and had not stopped to put back the chair. The other one was nicely in its place.

The table itself was round. It was covered with a white cloth and spread with exquisite napery. The service was mostly of silver, each article bearing the initials, "C. V." The remainder of the furnishings of the table had evidently been supplied from the café of the house.

The luncheon—there is no need that the articles should be specified—was still upon the table and was practically intact. This word is used advisedly, for some of the viands *had* been eaten, or partly eaten, and there was a soiled plate in front of each of the chairs.

Beside the plate that was directly opposite Vaughan there was a Martini cocktail which had evidently not been touched at all; beside each of the other plates there was an empty cocktail glass. Nick smelled of these and discovered that the glass beside Vaughan's body retained the odor of bitter almonds, showing that the drug had been poured into that, or into the cocktail, before it was swallowed. The other glass smelled merely of the Martini.

Just here the detective made another discovery: The knife and fork near Vaughan's plate and also near the plate opposite him were only partly soiled—as if they had merely been brought into contact with the food; not as if they had been actually used. The third knife and fork bore every evidence of thorough use—as if the guest who sat at Vaughan's right had not only partaken of the luncheon for his own benefit, but for the two who were with him as well.

As the detective studied the appearance of the table, it appeared indeed as if the person who had been seated at the right of the host had tried to make it appear that all three of them had eaten more or less heartily, and drank more or less heartily as well, while as a matter of fact, he had been the only one who had eaten or drunk anything at all at that board.

For it was evident to Nick that it was the male guest who had occupied that seat; that it had been the female who sat opposite Vaughan.

Another thing: On the table, reclining in its wicker basket, was a Chambertin bottle which was still a third filled with the Burgundy, and beside each plate at the table was a Burgundy glass, each having been used—apparently.

But as the detective left his seat and raised them one by one to examine them, he found—and he could perceive it easily from the appearance of the glasses—that while each of these glasses had been used to drink from, only one of them had been used more than once.

He crossed again to the side of his dead friend and felt of the back of his neck; it was as cold as ice already.

He touched the two dead hands where they rested upon the table, and found them to be in the same condition.

Then, tenderly, he attempted to raise the head from its recumbent position upon the folded arms—but only to discover that rigor mortis had stiffened the sinews so that the head would not rise.

He left that room then and went through the others, one by one.

There were three others; a dressing-room, a lounging-room, or den, a bedroom; there was also a bath.

Apparently everything was in perfect order, and Nick was not sufficiently familiar with the habits of Vaughan to know whether or not things were out of place.

Clarence Vaughan was one of a very few rich men who never kept a valet. Nick regretted that fact now; and then suddenly he recalled that once he had heard Vaughan say he despised having a listener always around, to hear his thoughts when he chose to utter them aloud, and that there was a hotel valet in the apartment-house who helped him when he required such attendance.

Remembering this, the detective stepped to the telephone and called the office of the building, and asked for the manager.

"You keep a regular hotel valet here, do you not?" he asked, when he received a reply.

"Yes."

"Is he a trustworthy fellow?"

"Thoroughly so. Why?"

"Never mind why. Send him up here. I wish to talk with him. But don't tell him anything about what has happened here. Be sure of that."

"Very good. He is here now. I will send him up at once."

Nick went to the door which opened from the lounging-room upon the main hall, and waited for the valet.

He came, presently; a stolid Englishman of middle age; a regular type of his calling.

He saw Nick standing in the doorway and approached him at once.

"You desired my services, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nick. "Come inside. I won't detain you long," and when the door was closed he added: "What is your name?"

"Hawkins, sir."

"When did you last serve Mr. Vaughan, Hawkins?"

"This morning, sir, at ten. He was expecting company at luncheon, at one."

"Do you know who served him at the luncheon? Who waited upon him and his guests?"

"I was to do so, sir, but at the last moment I was told that my services would not be needed."

"Do you mean that *nobody* served them while they were at table?"

"That is the way I understood it, sir."

"Tell me in what manner you were dismissed, and what was said to you about it."

"It was this way, sir. Mr. Vaughan sent down word for me last night, to come here to him at ten this morning. While I was assisting him, he informed me that he was expecting two guests to luncheon with him—a gentleman and lady. He said he had already given the necessary order at the café and that the luncheon was to be served here. But, pardon me, sir; I don't know why I should answer all these questions. May I ask where Mr. Vaughan is?"

"An accident has happened to Mr. Vaughan, Hawkins. I am empowered to act for him, and also for your regular employer, the manager. Now, go on with your story."

"Very well, sir. He said the luncheon was to be served in his parlor, and that he would like me to be in attendance."

"Yes. Well? What more, Hawkins?"

"The luncheon was to be at one o'clock. I had other appointments in the building for the morning—one at eleven, another at twelve. I promised to return here at a quarter to one."

"Did you do so?"

"I did, sir."

"And then?"

"When I rang, Mr. Vaughan came to the door and stepped outside to talk with me—it was quite different from anything I have ever known him to do before, sir."

"Well?"

"He said to me, 'I shall not need your services after all, Hawkins. My friends and I have decided that we will wait upon ourselves.' Then, sir, he gave me the fee he had promised, and I withdrew."

"Have you seen him at all since that time?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see the guests?"

"No, sir."

"Hawkins, I suppose you are thoroughly familiar with Mr. Vaughan's things, his wearing-apparel and with the arrangement of them all, in these rooms, are you not?"

"Perfectly so, sir. I attended to his wardrobe every day. I was almost the same as a regular valet to him, although I never waited upon him directly unless he sent for me."

"In that case, Hawkins, I wish you to go through these rooms with me and tell me if anything is out of place, and if so, what it is. I wish your assistance on a very grave matter. Hawkins, Mr. Vaughan is dead, and——"

"Dead, sir! My God!"

"Come," said the detective. "Come with me. I will show you, Hawkins."

CHAPTER III.

FOLLOWING A VERY SLENDER CLUE.

The detective conducted the valet at once to the room where the luncheon-party had been held; but he stopped him in the doorway and pointed silently toward the dead man in the chair at the table.

Hawkins held his breath. He was almost as white as a corpse himself.

"He may only be sleeping, sir," he gasped. "Have you tried to rouse him?"

"He has been dead many hours, Hawkins," replied Nick. "He died, I think, before he had eaten a mouthful of that feast. He drank his death from that cocktail glass beside him. It was prussic acid, Hawkins."

"You don't mean to tell me that he did it purposely—that he killed himself, sir?"

"I have not told you that. I have not suggested how he happened to swallow the poison. I know only that he did swallow it."

"I don't believe, sir—nothing in the world would ever make me believe that Mr. Vaughan committed suicide."

"I quite agree with you, Hawkins."

"Then he was—*murdered?*"

The detective nodded his head.

"By those people he had there to luncheon with him?"

Again the detective nodded.

Two huge tears started from Hawkins' eyes and rolled down his cheeks; otherwise he exhibited no emotion, save that perhaps his lips tightened over his teeth, and his hands, which Nick could not see, may have been tightly clenched.

But he had been trained all his life to be expressionless, and he did not forget it now; nevertheless, Nick said to him:

"You wre fond of him, Hawkins?"

"I loved him, sir. He was very kind to me."

"We will find his murderer—or his murderers, although I do not think that one of the parties to the crime was willingly guilty."

"You know—you know who they were, sir?"

"We won't discuss that now, Hawkins. I have work for you to do if you would help me to bring to justice those who have committed this deed."

"I am ready, sir."

"Come with me through the rooms. We will not disturb anything that is in this one until after the coroner has been here. We will take his bedroom first. I will sit down in this chair while you examine it."

"Very well, sir."

"I want you to proceed very carefully and to tell me of everything you discover which is not disposed as it should be. Neglect nothing, no matter how apparently trivial."

The detective had already discovered that Hawkins was a man of unusual intelligence for one in his station of life, so he seated himself and waited patiently.

The valet paused for a moment in the middle of the room, looking about him much as the detective would have done himself under like circumstances. After a little he said:

"There is nothing here, sir, that has not been handled by strangers. There is nothing that is exactly as it should be."

Nick made no reply. Hawkins went to the dresser; then into a closet off from the room; then he opened and examined the contents of each of the drawers of the dresser, and also of a chiffonier that was there. He acted so like a bloodhound on the scent that Nick smiled, and wondered if some day in the past Hawkins had not served an apprenticeship at Scotland Yard.

After a little he came up sharply in front of the detective, and saluted as if he were a soldier on duty, bringing his heels together with a sharp click.

"I thought so," said Nick, smiling.

"Thought what, sir?"

"That this is not the first time you have seen service of this kind. But never mind that now. Make your report."

"Sir, I have to report that this room has been ransacked from one end to the other; that every nook and cranny of it has been thoroughly searched by strange hands; that nothing has been neglected—*but that nothing is missing from it.*"

"There are articles of considerable value here, however, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir. Of great value."

"And nothing is missing?"

"Nothing, sir."

"It is as if the parties who were here were searching for some particular article or thing."

"Yes, sir. The search was carefully made, too, sir. Nobody less well acquainted with this room than I could have told that things had been moved and replaced. I doubt if Mr. Vaughan would have noticed the fact himself."

"We will take the dressing-room next, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir."

Here, as before, the detective seated himself while the valet did the searching; and here, as in the bedroom, the valet acted thoroughly the part of a sleuth, moving about deftly, eagerly, swiftly; touching things lightly; and again, as before, after he had finished he brought up in front of the detective with that same involuntary salute.

"Well?" asked the detective.

"The report is precisely the same as before, sir. Everything has been handled; nothing has been taken away. But the same expert searcher has rummaged through every article that this room contains."

"There are also articles of value in this room, Hawkins."

"Of great value; yes, sir. Many hundreds of dollars. But nothing has been taken. There are some cigar ashes on the floor in the closet, which suggests that here at least the searcher was a man."

"Oh, I have had no doubt of that, at any time. We will try the lounging-room now, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir."

"There is a small safe in there, I have noticed."

"Yes, sir."

"I have also noticed that it opens with a key, instead of by combination. Do you happen to know if Mr. Vaughan was in the habit of carrying that key around with him?"

"I know that he did not do so, sir."

"Do you mean that he had some place of concealment for it, here in the rooms?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know where the key was kept?"

"I do, sir."

"Possibly it was for that key that the search was made."

"The idea has occurred to me, sir."

"Well, we will leave the key and the safe also, to the last. Go ahead with your general examination of the room now."

The valet did so.

He went as rapidly from one thing to another as he had done before, for in this room there were many more articles to examine than in the others.

There was a huge rolltop desk with a set of pigeonholes above it; there was a case of files beside it; there was a smaller desk in one corner; there were little tables scattered about, covered with curios and articles of interest; there were the bookcases and the books themselves; there were the couches and the pillows, and lastly, there was the safe, already referred to.

It was at the rolltop desk, which was not locked, where Hawkins paused the longest time. Nick noticed that he had pulled a large check-book from its receptacle in the desk and was critically examining it—and the detective went forward and stood beside him.

"Well, Hawkins?" he said. "What now?"

"Mr. Carter," he said, "this desk is about the only thing in the room which I never disturbed at all when I have cared for these rooms. But this morning, sir, when I was here, Mr. Vaughan opened the desk and wrote a check for me. It was for forty dollars."

"Well? What about it?"

"Only this, sir. While he was writing the check I stood near him. I noticed particularly the arrangement of everything on the desk, and in opening it again just now it occurred to me that some of the articles on the desk had been misplaced—or rather that they occupy different relative positions now than they did at that time."

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I happened to remember the check he gave me this morning, and I took the liberty, too, of examining the inside of the check-book. Mr. Carter, there has been a check taken from this book since the one he gave to me."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I noticed that the check he wrote for me was the third one down from the top of the book. You will observe that there are four checks to the page here, sir?"

"Yes."

"The one he wrote for me was the third one down from the top of the page. As the book now is, the fourth has been used."

"Well, it is quite natural that he may have had occasion to write another check for some other person after you left him, Hawkins."

"Quite so, sir. I merely noticed the fact and thought I would call your attention to it. I think those people searched inside of this desk as well as in other places in the apartment."

"There can be no doubt of that."

"This stub is not filled out, sir. I have often seen Mr. Vaughan write checks, and he invariably filled out the stub before drawing the check—and he had another significant habit, sir; one which may be important for your consideration now."

"What was that, Hawkins?"

"He always wrote his signature before filling the check."

"That was a bad habit."

"He had a reason for it."

"What was that reason?"

"It was in the nature of a private mark. Have you seen his signature, sir?"

"Often."

"You are aware then that he wrote it with a very long up stroke of the C, and that the down stroke of the V began even higher than that."

"Yes."

"It was his habit to write his signature first, and blot it or let it dry. Then when he wrote in the body of the check, the two lines where the name of the payee and the amount to be drawn appeared, *were written over, or rather across the tops of the two capital letters of his name.* A check not so written by him would not be paid at his bank."

"I see. I see," said the detective. "It is a good point, too. It is your idea, Hawkins, that he might have written his signature on a second check, and so have left it blank for another person to fill out—eh?"

"It only occurred to me, sir."

"Hawkins, you should have been a detective instead of a valet. In the morning I will inquire at his bank about check number 3421. Now, Hawkins, you said you knew where the key to the safe is kept. Get it and we will have a look inside the safe."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER'S SIMPLE DEDUCTIONS.

A large French clock rested upon the mantel above the fireplace and Hawkins at once crossed the room toward it; but as he reached out his hand to move the clock, he stopped and turned toward the detective.

"I am afraid that we will not find the key," he said.

"Why?" asked Nick.

"Because the clock has been moved—it has been searched by the murderers."

"Nevertheless the key may be there. Look for it."

Hawkins obeyed, and in another moment turned about again with the key in his hand.

"Here it is," he said. "Will you open the safe, sir, or shall I do so?"

"Wait," replied the detective. "First tell me what should be inside the safe—if you are informed on that point."

"Keepsakes, mostly, sir. Some jewels, a few private papers, some costly laces—for that was Mr. Vaughan's hobby—and some cash."

"About how much cash was he in the habit of keeping there?"

"It was Mr. Vaughan's habit to draw ten thousand dollars at a time and keep it in the safe as a fund from which to supply himself with ready cash. When that fund got as low as one or two thousand dollars, he replenished it again."

"So there should be now anywhere from one thousand to twelve thousand dollars in cash in the safe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Open it."

The door of the safe, which was a small one, was quickly thrown open and the contents revealed; and one by one the articles it contained were taken out and laid upon the floor, at the command of the detective.

The laces were there; many keepsakes of minor value were there also, but there was no cash and no jewels to be found.

"I understand," said the detective. "You may return the articles to the safe now, as you found them; lock it and replace the key."

He turned back to the desk then and had recourse once more to the check-book on the desk.

Looking back over the stubs he found that Vaughan had drawn for himself, only the preceding day, ten thousand five hundred dollars; so it was safe to assume that the murderers had secured certainly as much as eleven thousand dollars.

Then, again, if that missing check from the book for which the stub had not been filled out *had* been utilized by the murderers, there was no telling how much more they may have obtained.

"Now, Hawkins," said the detective, "is there anything else in this room which appears at all different to you than it should?"

"Nothing but the position of the chairs when we entered it, sir."

"What about that?"

"I refer only to that large Morris chair, which was Mr. Vaughan's favorite seat. I have never known it to be moved from its position under the window until now. You will observe that it is half-way to the center of the room."

"Oh, that is nothing," replied the detective. "It only establishes your discernment, that is all. His guests might easily have pulled out the chair before they went to the luncheon-table. And that reminds me. I wish you to go down at once and find the waiter or waiters who——"

He stopped and looked at his watch.

"I had forgotten how late it is," he said. "They would not be here now."

"Nevertheless, sir, I can find them if you care to have me do so," said Hawkins.

"Very well. It is not much that I care to know from them. But find the waiter or waiters who brought the luncheon to this apartment and arranged it on the table in the parlor. Do not alarm them or let them know that anything has happened—but find out if they saw the two guests who were here, and if they can give a description of them."

"I will do that, sir; and report to you—when?"

"In the morning. At my house. To-night, if you prefer it. Here is my card."

The detective stepped to the door with the valet, and then, when he had gone, returned to the parlor-room with its dead occupant.

But he did nothing save to resume the chair he had occupied when he was there alone before, and to remain there silent and absorbed by his thoughts until the ringing of the bell announced the arrival of Patsy with the coroner.

The detective admitted them at once, and then he led the coroner to the room of death.

"I suppose you have guessed, doctor, that I had a reason for sending for you in this quiet way?" he asked.

"Yes, Nick. You usually have a reason for what you do. Poor Vaughan! This is terrible!"

"You knew him, doctor?"

"I knew him casually—yes. We were acquaintances; that was all. It is a case of suicide, I suppose?"

"It certainly has that appearance on the surface, does it not, doctor?"

"I should say yes, from the casual glance I have taken thus far."

"Well, doctor, it is *not* a suicide; it is a deliberate murder."

"Good Heaven!"

"It is. I have seen enough already to be positive of that. But the point is this: *I very much wish to have the world regard it as a suicide*, for the present."

"But what makes you think it is a murder, Nick?"

The doctor had already approached the body and felt of it. He had picked up the vial and smelled of it; then of the empty cocktail glass; and without waiting for the detective to reply to his question, he added:

"If I were asked to play the part of detective here, and now, I should say——"

"Well, what?" asked the detective.

"I should say that three sat down at this table to eat; that they had scarcely begun the repast when a quarrel of some sort occurred; that the person who sat there opposite Vaughan was a woman—and that the other one might have been a woman also. But, anyhow, that there was a quarrel and that it ended by the guests rising and leaving the table and the apartment without stopping to say good-by; and——"

"And that afterward, Vaughan was so upset by the quarrel, and the possible consequences of it, that he killed himself? Is that what you would say, doctor?"

"Yes; that is the way it looks to me. A man doesn't drink prussic acid by mistake. The odor is too strong and too unmistakable."

"Assuredly—to a person who is familiar with it."

"Well, even if a person were not familiar with it, the odor would not appear natural in a Martini cocktail, which is made of gin and vermouth."

"My dear sir, there are cocktails and cocktails. The odor of a cocktail never cuts any ice with a person who is fool enough to drink one. They are invariably gulped down at a swallow."

"That is true enough."

"And all over the city—all over the world, I suppose, there are men who believe that they possess an especial ability for the manufacture of them. They introduce all sorts of flavors, and they name their vile concoctions anything they can think of, from 'brain-dusters' to 'maiden's hair fern.' Welch rarebits and cocktails are the two things which a certain class of men and women think they can make a little better than anybody else."

"What are you getting at, Nick?"

"I am endeavoring to show you how Vaughan was induced to swallow that cocktail which smelled so strong of bitter almonds that even he should have been alarmed."

"Well?"

"The guests at this table were a man and a woman——"

"How do you know that?"

"I know it for several reasons. They are not important just now. They were not only a man and a woman, but they were husband and wife, and——"

"Do you mean that you actually know who they were, Carter?"

"Yes. I will come to that presently."

"Excuse me. Go on."

"You will see that Vaughan had already ordered a bottle of Burgundy for the luncheon. I happen to know that he was not a drinking man, and doubtless he thought that would suffice."

"Well?"

"The man—who sat there at Vaughan's right—proposed a cocktail, we will say, and asked if he might be permitted to manufacture them. If you will step into the lounging-room, you will find that every ingredient is there, and that cocktails have been manufactured there some time to-day."

"Go ahead, Nick."

"Can't you imagine Vaughan seated here, facing the woman he loved, across——"

"The woman he loved?"

"Yes."

"But you just now said she was the other chap's wife!"

"So she was. Let me finish, and then I will explain."

"All right."

"Vaughan remained here at the table with the woman while the man went to the other room to make the cocktails. When he returned, he doubtless exclaimed, something like this: 'Here is a nectar for the gods. It is a recipe of my own, Vaughan. Just smell of that, will you? Do you notice the almonds in it? It's fine! You should swallow it at a draft and then notice the result. Eh? *Now!*'"

"That dose would have killed him before he got the cocktail down his throat," said the doctor.

"Of course; and that is what the man intended it to do. I don't believe the woman had the least idea that a murder was intended. At least that is my present belief."

"Go on, Carter. You make it sound interesting."

"After Vaughan was dead, there was no help for it, was there? The woman realized that she was in a position where she must bear her portion of the blame."

"Sure. I can see that well enough."

"Of course, there was some sort of a scene between the two, after that. We cannot even guess what it was. But we do know that she was sufficiently alarmed so that she would not drink any of the Burgundy. Nor would she eat."

"It looks to me as if all three had eaten and drunk," said the doctor.

"But if you will look closer you will see that they did not. Only the man ate or drank. He ate and drank for all three, using first one plate and then another, drinking the wine from one glass and then another. The fact of the murder did not disturb him at all. Now, doctor, I want you to tell me, if you can, about when Vaughan died—about what time to-day was it, do you think?"

The coroner crossed to the body again and began a more careful examination, during which Patsy assisted him; and at last, after a short time, he turned to the detective and said:

"Clarence Vaughan has been dead at least nine hours; it may be ten."

The detective looked at his watch. Then he smiled rather grimly.

"It is now half-past ten," he said. "If you are correct, and I have no doubt you are, he died between one o'clock and half-past one. The luncheon was ordered for one o'clock, and was probably served here at the rooms promptly. You see, doctor, his murderer did not give poor Vaughan long to live, once he was in the apartment with him. There was no time to have eaten anything. They had just seated themselves at table when that cocktail was suggested."

"One would think that you were here, Nick."

"I wish to Heaven I might have been here, doctor."

CHAPTER V.

THE MISSING PHOTOGRAPH.

"Now, doctor," said the detective, "we will telephone for the police whenever you wish—or, perhaps, we had best let the manager of the house do that, and make his own arrangements with them. All that I wish you to do for me in the matter is to say—what you first believed—that it is *apparently* a case of suicide. I should very much prefer that that should be the present impression."

"I have no objections, of course. Only, Nick, you must remember that it might make some difference to his family—to Vaughan's, I mean."

"His family, doctor, consists of one sister—a very beautiful girl of twenty-two. Mabel Vaughan passes most of her time at their country home on Long Island. I shall go to see her in person, in my motor, as soon as we leave this house. The news of her brother's death must be broken to her at once and she must know the truth."

"Very well. I will do as you say. But I wish you'd explain one thing for me."

"What is that, doctor?"

"You seem to know mighty well already who it was that killed Vaughan."

"I do. I am positive about it. He was killed by a man named Melville Bergen—he pronounces the G in the name with the soft sound. The woman who was here with him was his wife, who prefers to be known as Imogene Mallory, and——"

The doctor uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that this is the same man and woman who were actors in that scene at Pullaney's? That the woman who was here to-day is the woman whom Vaughan was going to marry? Who was supposed to have thought her husband dead, and all that?"

"Precisely," replied the detective.

"Now I understand what you mean when you mention that Vaughan was in love with her. But is that fellow Bergen really her husband?"

"Yes."

"And she knew that he was alive all the time? Even when she was about to marry Vaughan?"

"Yes."

"Then what in the world were these two doing here, apparently ready to lunch with Vaughan in peace and concord, and—I confess, I can't understand it at all."

"Nor can I, doctor. I can only guess at it."

"Well, Nick, do a little guessing, then, just to please me, will you? Your guesses are apt to come pretty close to the facts."

"In the first place Vaughan has believed that Imogene did not know that her husband was alive. I permitted him to continue in that belief, because I do not think it well to shatter idols needlessly."

"Nor I."

"You know Bergen was under arrest. But the other day he was admitted to bail. He sought out and found his wife. Bad as he is, she loves him, and she is like putty under his influence."

"I have known many cases of that sort."

"Of course I have no means of knowing what passed between the husband and the wife when they met; but if I am to guess at it——"

"Yes; that is it. Guess!"

"I should say that before he saw her, he had been here to see Vaughan. In all probability he has told Vaughan that for a consideration he would permit Imogene to go to Dakota and obtain a divorce."

"I see. Vaughan might drop into a trap like that, loving the woman, believing in her, and realizing that she was tied to such a scoundrel."

"Exactly."

"Vaughan knew perfectly well where Imogene was staying. It may be that he asked her to come here to these rooms to meet her husband in his presence and to draw up an agreement by which, for a certain amount, Bergen was to get off the earth and permit his wife to obtain the divorce. That would explain——" He stopped.

"Explain what?"

"Explain why Vaughan had already signed a check without filling it in and without filling out the stub either, leaving it in his check-book on his desk until the final agreement as to the amount should be reached. I begin to understand better now why Vaughan was murdered."

"What the devil are you talking about, Carter?"

"I was picking up some loose threads of evidence that I had already collected, but which I did not think important till now. I think I see it all now."

"I wish you would tell me what you see."

"I think I see that Bergen came here literally to sell his wife to Vaughan; that when the luncheon was brought into this room and spread upon the table, Bergen and Imogene were left by themselves in the lounging-room for a time; that while there, Bergen saw the check-book on the desk and examined it; that he found therein a check that was already signed in blank—*and that then it suddenly occurred to him that he could have the money and keep Imogene, too.*"

The coroner nodded. He was beginning to understand.

"Bergen is the sort of crook who would carry a vial of prussic acid in his pocket, or concealed somewhere about his person, so that he could swallow it himself, if a crisis should come to him—so you see it was ready."

"Yes."

"It is all very clear to me now; just what his sudden resolution meant to him."

"Tell me what it is, Carter."

"Well, this. Imogene is at heart a good woman. She means well, but she is weak—wherever Bergen is concerned. She had, however, resolved to rid herself of him. She had told me as much and I believed her. Bergen understood that, too."

"Well?"

"Therefore, for a consideration, he was willing to consent to the Dakota divorce—willing to push it along, so to speak."

"Well?"

"But when he saw that check signed in blank on the desk in the other room, he instantly decided that he would murder Vaughan with the poison he had in his pocket for himself, in an emergency. It was not a part of his plan to tell his wife anything about his intention, for by murdering Vaughan in her presence he accomplished three things."

"What were they?"

"The first was, that he could fill out that check for any amount he pleased, after Vaughan was dead, and could probably get it cashed at the bank this afternoon just before the closing hour."

"And the second?"

"The second was that he would be rid of Vaughan, of whom he was no doubt jealous, in a way—and in such a manner that it would appear to have been a suicide committed after his guests had left him. At all events there could be no evidence to convict him of the crime, even though he were suspected."

"And the third?"

"The third was perhaps the most potent of all. By committing the murder in Imogene's presence, he made her a party to it, although she had no idea that it was to be done. He would therefore have her entirely under his domination forever after that, working upon her fears. In a word, he could do as he pleased with her after such a scene as doubtless occurred in this room. You see, he killed three birds with one stone. I see the whole thing now."

"I am glad you do. When will you find and arrest those people, Nick?"

"Ah, that is another question."

"But you will find them?"

"You bet your life I will find them. I will find him at least, and bring him to account for this crime."

"Well, there is nothing more that I can do here, is there?"

"That is for you to say, as coroner. I think if you would consent to go to the police-station with the manager to report this to the police, it would help him out of a difficult situation."

"I will do that, certainly, at once."

"You can tell them over there, also, that I have the case in hand. They can so report to headquarters."

"I'll do that, too."

"And, doctor, as you go down, will you do one more thing for me? I want to rush from here in a few minutes, and get over to notify Vaughan's sister before she gets the news from another source."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"Merely ask Mr. Ring, the manager, if he will attend to securing an undertaker."

"All right. I'll do that. You are not going down with me, just now?"

"No. I want to remain here a few minutes longer."

The moment the doctor was gone, Nick turned to Patsy.

"I am afraid that I cannot give you and Ten-Ichi this case, after all, my lad," he said.

"It looks rather as if you would have to handle it yourself, chief," was the response.

"It is now almost midnight," continued the detective. "There is nothing more that can be done to-night, only to get out the Peerless and drive to Loyola Park, on Long Island. Mabel Vaughan must be notified at once of what has happened, and I think it is up to me to do it."

"Couldn't I do it for you, chief?"

"You could—yes; but I feel impelled to attend to it myself. I'll tell you what you can do—you can get the car and bring it here, and then you can go to Loyola with me, if you care to do that. I will be down at the front door in thirty minutes, waiting for you, Patsy."

And so it happened that Nick was again alone in the rooms with his dead friend.

But it was not for long. Scarcely had Patsy had time to reach the street below before the bell rang, and when the detective went to the door he found that Hawkins had returned, and was ready to make his report.

"I was more expeditious than I hoped to be, sir," he said, entering and closing the door, "and so I took the chance of finding you here still. Besides that, sir, there was another matter——"

"Give me your report first, and then we will attend to the other matter, whatever it is."

"Yes, sir. There were two waiters who brought up the luncheon and spread it upon the table in the parlor." (Nick and Hawkins were seated now in the lounging-room, and all the time Hawkins' eyes were roving around the place as if he were in search of something.) "They did not see either of Mr. Vaughan's guests."

"Well."

"They could only tell me that the two guests retired to this room while they were arranging the table, and that Mr. Vaughan remained with them—the waiters, you know—while they were here. That means that the guests were alone in this room, sir."

"Precisely. What do you make out of that, Hawkins?"

"I only thought, sir, that it might have something to do with the disappearance of that check."

"Without a doubt it has. I repeat, you should have been a detective instead of a valet. Now, what is the other matter to which you just now referred?"

"This, sir. I assured you that there was nothing missing from this room—save what was taken from the safe, of course; but after I got away from here I remembered that a photograph of Miss Mabel was missing from its place beside the clock, over there, sir. I don't understand how I could have failed to notice it while I was here and still have carried the memory of it in my mind; but I find now, on returning here, that I was correct. This morning, when I was in this room, there was a photograph of Miss Mabel here. Now, it is not here, and I think——"

"What do you think?"

"I think, sir, that the murderers must have taken it. How else could it have disappeared?"

"Quite true," said Nick. "How else?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MABEL VAUGHAN.

Hawkins' statement, apparently irrelevant to the entire matter, nevertheless set the detective to thinking, and for some inexplicable reason he was suddenly very glad that he had decided to go himself to Loyola that night.

"Does Miss Mabel Vaughan know you, Hawkins?" he asked, after a short pause.

"Oh, yes, sir; very well indeed. She has often lunched here with her brother, and I have always served them."

"Then, in that case, I think I will take you with me."

"Take me with you, sir? May I ask where?"

"I have sent for my automobile. I intend to go to Loyola Park to-night to break this terrible news to Miss Vaughan before it is thrown at her like a bomb."

"Ah, sir; but that is very good and thoughtful of you. And you will take me with you, sir, did you say?"

"Yes. I am almost a stranger to her; but if she hears that Hawkins is asking for her, she will understand at once that it has something to do with her brother, and the knowledge will in a measure prepare her for what is to come. Yes; you shall go with me. Whatever your engagements in the morning may be——"

"Will make no possible difference, sir, if you will pardon me for interrupting."

"I think, Hawkins, we will go now. The police will be here shortly, and then an undertaker. The automobile will be at the door in a few moments. Come!"

At the office of the house, Nick found the same clerk on duty who had been there when he and Patsy arrived, early in the evening—and he called him aside for a moment.

"You witnessed the arrival and the departure of Mr. Vaughan's guests, I believe you said to me?" he asked him.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you give me rather a correct idea of what time they arrived, and when they went away again?"

"They arrived separately, sir. They went away together."

"Ah! Indeed! Who came first? The man, or the woman?"

"The lady arrived first, sir; but not more than ten minutes, if that much, before the gentleman came."

"What time did she appear?"

"It was half-past twelve, or within a minute or two of that time. I had just come on duty."

"Can you describe her to me?"

"Unfortunately I cannot—more than to say that she was very tastefully dressed, and was, I should suppose, young. She wore a veil—a spotted white veil; but I could not see her features through it."

"Did she ask here at the desk for Mr. Vaughan?"

"She paused merely long enough to say, 'Mr. Vaughan is expecting me.' Mr. Vaughan had already sent down word to the office to that effect, and I directed her at once to the elevator. That was all there was of that."

"And ten minutes later the man arrived?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a looking chap was he?"

"A middle-aged man, I should say. Fifty, or thereabouts. Iron-gray hair and mustache. He was awfully English in his appearance; wore a monocle in one eye."

"Did he stop at the desk?"

"No; he went directly to the elevator."

"It didn't occur to you, I suppose, that he was disguised, did it?"

"Certainly not. I never thought of it at all."

"How did you know that he was the guest whom Mr. Vaughan expected?"

"Because I went to the elevator when it came down again and asked the elevator-boy. We always do that here when strangers enter the house and go up without asking at the desk for whom they wish to see."

"You say the two left the building together?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was that?"

"Shortly before three o'clock—possibly as much as twenty minutes before."

"Did you notice them particularly when they went out?"

"I did, sir, because the lady seemed not well. The fact is, sir, I suspected that the wine at their luncheon had possibly affected her somewhat. She was leaning on the gentleman's arm."

"I see. They made no pause on the way out?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know if they took a cab at the door, or walked away?"

"They walked, I think—in fact, I am sure of it. I saw them turn toward Broadway."

"The lady seemed to be affected by something, did she? As if—well, it was your idea that the wine had been rather too much for her?"

"That was the thought I had about it, yes, sir."

"Now, have you ever seen either of them here before, at any time?"

"I think, sir, that the gentleman called yesterday; that is, I have since thought it was the same man. It was before I came on duty, but I was waiting here in the office for the time for my watch when a man passed in and inquired at the desk for Mr. Vaughan. I think now that it was the same one."

The sharp tooting of an automobile horn outside warned Nick that Patsy had arrived, and with a word of thanks to the clerk he called to Hawkins and passed through the doorway upon the street.

"Cross by the Williamsburg Bridge, Patsy," was all that Nick Carter said to his assistant. Then he motioned to Hawkins to enter the tonneau, and following him, he settled himself in a corner and closed his eyes.

But whether it was to sleep or not, nobody could have told; and Patsy, acting as chauffeur, sent the huge machine gliding swiftly and almost silently through the night.

Once across the bridge and away from the traveled streets, he increased the pace, and at last when the country was reached, he "opened her wide," as he expressed it.

It was shortly after five in the morning when they entered the grounds of Loyola Park, and after gliding along a winding roadway, at last came to a stop under the porte-cochére of the splendid mansion.

"Now, Hawkins," said the detective, "your work begins."

"Yes, sir. Tell me what I am to do."

"Summon the butler to the door. Tell him that it is imperative that Miss Vaughan should receive, as soon as possible, a messenger who comes from her brother. I will wait here until she is ready to receive me."

"But you wish me to speak with her first, Mr. Carter?"

"Certainly. Tell her that an accident has happened to Mr. Vaughan, and that I have come here to tell her all about it. You need not tell her that your master is dead."

It took a long time to rouse that particular butler. Evidently he was not accustomed to calls at that hour of the morning.

But at last he came, sleepy-eyed and portly—and pompous as well; outraged at being disturbed.

But he knew Hawkins, it seemed, and realized at once that he was from the head of the house.

"'Ello, 'Awkins!" he exclaimed. "What in the wide world brings you 'ere at this hour, me good man?"

"I must see Miss Vaughan at once, Simpson. Please say to her that a message——"

"But bless your 'eart, me man, Miss Vaughan is not 'ere."

"Not here? Where is she, then?"

"W'y, she went to meet her brother, Mr. Clarence, in response to the telegram that came in the hafternoon of yesterday."

Nick Carter of course overheard this conversation, and now he leaped from the tonneau of the motor and hastened forward.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Is Miss Mabel Vaughan not at home?"

"No, sir. She is not at 'ome," replied the butler pompously. "May I inquire, sir, who you are, sir?"

"What was that I heard you say about a telegram that came to her in the afternoon of yesterday?" demanded the detective, not heeding the question. "Mr. Clarence Vaughan is dead, Simpson, and it is necessary that we should find Miss Vaughan as soon as possible. Where is she?"

The butler, with all his pomposity, loved his young master, and he staggered back now as if he had received a blow. For a moment he trembled like a leaf, and he could only gasp:

"Dead? Dead? Mr. Clarence dead? Oh, sir, tell me it is not true!"

"Alas, Simpson, it is only too true," replied Nick. "Now tell me of your young mistress."

"W'y, sir, she went to 'im w'en she left 'ere."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He telegraphed for 'er, sir."

"When? At what time?"

"I should say, sir, that it was about five when the message got 'ere. It came from the telegraph-office over the telephone."

"Let us come inside, Simpson. Come along, Patsy. Now, Simpson, do you think you could find that telegram? Miss Vaughan did not take it with her, did she?"

"No, sir. Certainly not."

"Try to find it for me."

"I think, sir, that Miss Mabel carried it to her room with her when she went to change her costume. I will look for it, sir."

"Patsy," said the detective, when the butler was gone from the room, "the clouds are thickening. There is much more to this than we supposed."

Patsy nodded.

"That telegram must have been sent by Bergen, after he killed Clarence. Hawkins!"

"Yes, sir."

"We now have the explanation of that missing photograph."

"I think so, sir."

"Bergen wished to be sure of his identification of Miss Vaughan when he met her."

"But what could have been his object in luring her away from her home?"

"Heaven only knows. For original villainy commend me to Melville Bergen."

"Perhaps," suggested Patsy, "he is about to try something of the same game on her, that he compelled Imogene to try on Clarence. I can't see any other object. He wouldn't take her away for ransom, would he?"

"Hardly that. I'm all up a tree for the moment, but I'll think it out presently. Here is Simpson with the telegram."

The butler entered the room with the message in his hand, and at once gave it to Nick. It read:

"Start at once when you receive this for New York via Long Island City. Automobile will meet you at Thirty-fourth Street ferry, New York side. Going on short trip. Leave your maid at home. Don't fail.

"CLARENCE."

Nick folded the message and put it in his pocket. Then he turned to Simpson.

"Simpson," he said, "you must be the man of the house now. The body of your master will be sent here as soon as it is embalmed. Your young mistress has been lured away by the same people who caused his death. But I will find her for you, Simpson; I will find her if you will continue your duty here—and keep these matters from the other servants for the present."

CHAPTER VII.

DANIEL MALONEY—CHAUFFEUR.

There was only one thing for them to do then, and that was to go to Thirty-fourth Street ferry with all possible speed; but the start was not made until Simpson had supplied them with a hearty breakfast, of which they all stood in need.

While they were eating, Nick put more questions to Simpson concerning the time of Mabel's departure from the house, and her probable arrival at Long Island City.

According to the schedule as related by Simpson, who seemed well posted about the time-tables to and from New York, Mabel should have arrived at the New York side of the ferry at or near half-past six o'clock—*expecting to meet her brother when that brother had already been six hours dead.*

It was evident that Bergen had lost no time in perfecting his plans, once the murder was committed, and he had collected the fruits of his crime, for now Nick had not the slightest doubt that the man had managed to cash a check for a large amount.

But why had he chosen to lure Mabel Vaughan away from her home?

Nick asked himself this question over and over again without once satisfying himself with a reply.

And having gotten possession of her, where would he take her? What did he intend or hope to do with her?

While they were crossing the ferry on the boat, Nick was considering how best to obtain the information he sought at the New York side.

It would be hopeless to ask the policemen on duty now, for they would not be the same men who were there at six-thirty the preceding evening.

It would be equally useless to inquire of the employees of the ferry; the crews would be different all around.

"We will have to depend upon newsboys and ordinary vendors, Patsy," he told his assistant. "It is barely possible that among them there may be one who has noticed an automobile waiting which took away a young lady, all alone."

"Even so," replied Patsy, "you would get no idea where the automobile was going."

"No; but we might find out what make it was, or what number it bore, or something about it. As the case stands now, we are entirely up in the air. Hawkins!"

"Yes, sir."

"For the present I appoint you one of my assistants. You have already demonstrated the fact that you can do detective work; let us see how well you can do it now."

"How, sir?"

"Pick up what information you can of anybody who can supply it about a young lady who entered an automobile here at or about six-thirty last night. And you, Patsy, can go on your own hook, too. You can leave me in the machine. I will run her off the boat and wait somewhere near, against the curb."

When Nick passed through the gate upon the street, he ran the machine away over to the right, beyond where the street-cars stand for passengers. He did that because he thought it would be the safest place to leave the machine—where it would be the least likely to be meddled with by inquisitive boys.

But as he pulled out his plug and left the car to make some inquiries on his own account, he noticed a man who was seated on a high stool behind a peanut-stand, near-by, and a second glance told him that the man sat on the high stool because he had no legs to stand upon.

He had somehow lost both of them, and he was anchored at his post until relief in some form should come. Doubtless he was taken there every morning by a relative and taken away again at night.

"Ho, my man," said Nick, approaching him. "Will you keep an eye on my car for a few minutes and warn away anybody who gets too curious?"

"I will, sor. You will persave that I can't chase 'em away, sor."

"So I see. Well, do as I tell you and it will be a dollar in your pocket when I return."

"I wish I could always earn 'em as easy, sor."

Nick was starting away, when it occurred to him that

he might as well begin his questions right here of this man who, because he had no legs to walk with, kept his eyes busily engaged the whole day through. He turned back to him.

"This is rather an out-of-the-way spot for automobiles to stop and wait, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yis, sor. But they stop here sometimes. As ye say, sor, it is out of the way, and for that same reason some of 'em seems to like it best, sor. They stops here sometimes."

"Were you here last night about half-past six?" asked the detective.

"I was, sor."

"Possibly there was an automobile stopped here just about that time, last evening."

"There was, sor."

"I am trying to obtain some information about such a car. If you can give me any of the sort I want, I will make it worth your while."

"What do you want to know about it, sor? If I have the information, I will give it to ye gladly."

"Well, suppose you tell me everything that you noticed about that particular car—or any other car that happened along near here at or about that time."

"Well, sor, that particular car contained two people when it drove up to the curb. Wan was a man who ran the machine. The other was a loidy who sat in the back part of it. The man had on a black leather coat and a cap and them goggles that some of them fellers wears. The loidy wore a thick veil."

"Go on," said Nick. "What more?"

"Whin the car came up against the curb the man got out and left the engine of the machine running. Then he walked around to the loidy in the back part of the car, and he said to her, says he, 'Imogene——'"

"*What!*" exclaimed Nick, thoroughly surprised.

"Faith, that seemed to touch you, sor. Mebby I've struck the car you're lookin' after."

"I think you have. Go on. Tell me all about it."

"He says to her, says he, 'Imogene, you be after sittin' here till I come back wid her. I will have no difficulty in recognizing her from the picture, and if you should come with me she might recognize you. There might be complications,' says he."

"Well! Well! Well!" said Nick.

"Wid that he wint away and divil a bit did I see of him again for some time; not till after a couple of boats had come in; and then he came a hiking back along wid as purty a colleen as ye iver sot eyes on, sor; that she was.

"'Git in, Miss Vaughan,' he says to her, says he. I remember the name because it's as Irish as me own, which is Murphy. 'Git in, Miss Vaughan,' says he, 'and we'll have ye up there in a jiffy.' And then he introduced her to the woman, who was already in the car, but I didn't catch the name at all; and then, sure, they whisked themselves away—and that's all."

Nick silently handed the Irishman a two-dollar bill, remarking a moment later:

"Try now to earn another bill just like that one."

"How can I do that, sor?"

"Did you see the number on the car?"

"I did, sor, but I took no notice of it."

"Do you know what make of car it was?"

"I do not, sor. Sure, they're all alike to me. Wan is the same as another. But, sure, hold yer whist, now! Hey, Danny! *Danny!*"

A young man of twenty, who was just then crossing the street diagonally past them, stopped and turned.

"Hello, Mike!" he replied. "What's the matter with you now?"

"Will ye be afther comin' here a minute, Danny?" cried the peanut and candy vendor.

"Sure I will. What can I do for you?"

"I say, Danny! This gintlemon wants some information that I can't give him." Then to the detective: "'Tis me nephew, sor, and he is afther learnin' to be a driver of wan of thim machines." Then to the young man again:

"Danny, you were here wid me last night whin the big car stopped at the curb there and the man got out and left a loidy inside while he went to the ferry to meet another young woman, and whin he brought her back wid him she was that swate that we both stared at her, and whin they was gone away you said——"

"Hold on there, Mike. If you run so fast you'll lose your trolley. Sure I remember about it."

He turned then, respectfully, to Nick and took off his cap.

"How can I serve you, sir?" he asked, with a manner and address that would have done credit to any one.

"I want some information about that particular machine and the people who were inside it," replied the detective.

"I know nothing about the people in the car, sir, save that one of the ladies was young and very beautiful; the other wore a veil, so that I could not see her features. The man had a red mustache, although his eyes were black. I thought that an oddity."

"It was. What make was the car?"

"It was a Stevens-Duryea, sir; one of the new ones."

"Did it occur to you to notice the number of the card on the machine?"

"She carried three cards, I remember. I do not recall any of the numbers."

"What color was the machine?"

"Bottle-green, a queer color for a Stevens. But I have seen that same machine before."

"You have? Where?"

"It was an exhibition in the window at Spalding's, less than a week ago. It looked very new, too; as if it had just been put in commission."

"You would know the car if you saw it again, do you think?"

"Among ten thousand; yes, sir."

"Your uncle tells me that you are learning to be a chauffeur."

"I have my license, sir. I received it to-day," was the proud reply.

"Then you have not yet found employment?"

"No, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Daniel Maloney."

"How much wages do you expect to receive, Danny?"

"I hoped to make myself worth sixty a month, sir."

"Very well, I will engage you right now, for a month at least, and if you can find that Stevens car for me, I'll make it a year. Would you like to work for me, Danny?"

"It comes like a thunder-clap out of a clear sky, sir. Of course I want a job. Would you mind, sir, if I should ask for your name?"

"I am Nick Carter. I want——"

Nick paused in what he was about to say, for the old man on the stool had thrown up both hands and uttered a cry of joy that could be heard across the street, and Danny had flushed red and then turned pale, and then flushed red again. And now he leaned forward and said:

"Is it true, sir? Are you Nick Carter, sir? *The* Nick Carter?"

"Certainly," replied the detective.

"And you want me to serve you? And to help you find that Stevens car? And you'll give me steady employment with you? Is that what you mean, sir?"

"That is exactly what I mean, Danny."

"Wait, sir, before I faint away entirely. You haven't asked me for references, sir."

"Your face and your manner is your reference; so is your Uncle Michael here. Is it a bargain, Danny?"

"*Bargain!* Heaven bless you, sir. I'll serve you with me heart's blood, if you'll only let me; so I will!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHECK FOR $50,000.

When Patsy and Hawkins returned to the car, neither had anything to report; but the information that Nick had gleaned from Danny Maloney compassed more than any of them had had any hopes of obtaining.

It must be remembered that the time was still early in the morning—that is, comparatively early, for it was not yet eight o'clock.

As it was, however, Melville Bergen had more than twenty-four hours' start of the detective, and he had left no clue behind him by which he could be pursued, save that one extremely slender one supplied by Danny's recognition of the Stevens-Duryea car.

But that fact that the young man had recognized the machine as one he had seen on exhibition, afforded some opportunity that it might be traced—for the detective regarded it now as a simple matter to obtain the numbers that were carried by the car.

"Have you ever operated a Peerless, Danny?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Get under the wheel and begin your duties right now. Hawkins, you may ride with Danny. Mr. Garvan and I will ride in the tonneau."

"Where to, sir?" asked Danny, when they were seated; and the flush of pride at his new employment was still upon his face.

"We are going to find that Stevens car," replied the detective. "You have already told me that you saw the car on exhibition very recently. It is natural then that you should know where to take us."

They had not gone half a dozen blocks before Nick Carter made up his mind that he had secured a jewel in

Danny Maloney. He handled the motor with caution, but with perfect confidence, and he knew how to get speed out of it without infringing upon the ordinances of the city.

It wasn't long before they came to a halt in front of Spalding's, in Forty-second Street; but they found here that it would be necessary to go to the garage for the information they wished.

That information was, however, very slight indeed. It was merely this:

"The car carried a New York, a New Jersey, and a Connecticut number; it had been purchased for cash the preceding day at four o'clock in the afternoon by a man who had given his name as Perkins; the man had been alone; he had driven the machine away from the garage himself," etc., etc., etc.

That was all, but it was something.

At least they had obtained copies of the numbers carried by the car they sought.

"Now, Danny," said the detective, when they were again seated in the Peerless, "take us to the headquarters of the Automobile Club of America."

To the secretary of the club who was on duty there, the detective made this statement:

"I am here to offer a hundred dollars reward to the man who will locate for me a certain Stevens car. There is a description of the car written down on this slip of paper, together with the three numbers she carries. I do not know whether the car has remained in the city, or has gone away through Connecticut, or Jersey, or over to Long Island. In fact, I have no idea what course the car would take from here. The point is that I wish to locate it."

"I understand you, sir."

"I have thought," continued the detective, "that through your agents and garages scattered about the country around here, you might be able to locate the car for me. I will leave a hundred dollars with you, to be paid to the man who can put me on the track of that car."

"Was the car stolen, sir?"

"No. It is not the car I want; it is the people in the car."

"Oh, I see."

"I don't wish them to be molested in any way. I don't wish them to know that they are sought for. Whoever finds the car will only have to telephone to you the fact that he has found it, and then if you will transmit the information to me, I can assure you, sir, that I will express my appreciation in a very emphatic manner."

"I will attend to it for you, sir. I have no doubt that we can locate it before the day is ended."

"Thank you. I will leave a second hundred with you, to cover any expenses that may arise. And if you will inform me promptly when you have any information——"

"I certainly will; but you have forgotten to tell me who you are and how——"

"That's a fact. I am Nick Carter, and there is my telephone number."

"Nick *Carter?* The *detective?*"

"Yes."

"You may be sure, Mr. Carter, that nothing shall be left undone to assist you in this matter. I can cover every road that leads out of New York."

"I know that. That is why I applied to you. I would suggest that you cover the roads for a considerable distance, for the reason that the car has been gone since say seven o'clock last night. It was last seen at Thirty-fourth Street Ferry, and started away through Thirty-fourth Street."

"With how many passengers, Mr. Carter?"

"Two ladies in the tonneau; a man under the wheel. The man had given his name as Perkins, but he would be likely to have changed that several times since then."

"I see. I will set about the matter at once, sir."

Nick returned to his car outside, and directed that he be taken at once to the bank where Clarence Vaughn had kept his account—or, at least, the one of his accounts which interested the detective.

It was exactly ten o'clock when Nick stepped from the car in front of the bank. The doors had just been thrown open, and he was the first to enter the institution.

He went at once to the cashier and introduced himself.

"I am Nicholas Carter, a detective," he said. "Possibly you may have heard of me."

"Often, Mr. Carter. What can we do for you?"

"May I ask if you have been informed yet of the death of Mr. Clarence Vaughan?"

"The death—of—*whom?* Clarry Vaughan? Dead?" The banker was visibly shocked, but he pulled himself together and inquired calmly:

"When did it occur, Mr. Carter?"

"He died about one o'clock yesterday afternoon," replied Nick. "I have called here this morning to inquire about a check that was probably cashed here at your bank yesterday, just before you closed; one of Clarence Vaughan's checks. It was probably drawn for a large amount. The number of the check was 3421."

The banker stared at the detective for a moment speechlessly; at last he replied:

"There was such a check—just before closing-time—and it was for a large amount. The teller called me in consultation about it before he cashed it. Are you here to tell me that the check in question was a forgery, sir?"

"I am here to tell you that the check was presented to you by the murderer of Clarence Vaughan."

"The *murderer!* You did not tell me that Vaughan was murdered."

"He *was* murdered—and by the man for whom you cashed that check. The news will be in the afternoon papers to-day, but it will be called a suicide. He was poisoned with prussic acid, at one o'clock yesterday, or very soon after that. I did not find his body until evening."

"It is horrible!"

"Yes; it is horrible. What I wish to do now is to capture the man who killed him."

"But what of the check, Mr. Carter? It could not have been a forgery. The signature——"

"I know all about the signature. I don't think you could call it a forgery, in any sense of the word. It is not even a raised check. I suppose you know of the habit that Vaughan had of signing his checks before he filled them out? In fact, that was a sort of private mark of his, was it not, to write the substance of the check *over* the two capital letters of his name?"

"Yes. Precisely."

"Well, in this case, it would appear that Vaughan had signed the check and left it blank, to be filled out later, after he should have had an expected interview with the man who killed him. My idea is that the murderer found the blank check, and filled in the amount he wished to draw, making it as large as he dared."

"But how do you account for the back of the check, Mr. Carter?"

"What about the back of the check?"

"Clarence Vaughan's signature is also on the back of the check, and over it are written the four words, 'Identification unnecessary. Indorsement correct.'"

"Will you let me see the check?" asked Nick.

It was brought to him at once, and he read:

"'Pay to the order of Melville Bergen, fifty thousand dollars.'" The signature was unmistakably Vaughan's.

The detective looked at the back of the check, and saw that it was as the cashier had stated; but he saw another thing which the cashier and the teller had not observed, and that was that the supposed signature of Vaughan on the back of the check was a forgery.

The cashier saw it, too, when his attention was called to it by the detective.

"You see," he said in explanation, "the face of the check was so genuine that it never occurred to us to scrutinize the back of it particularly. We merely requested Mr. Bergen to indorse the check a second time; that is all."

Nick nodded.

"It appears," he said musingly, "that in addition to Bergen's other accomplishments, he is a very clever forger."

"Yes," said the banker. "The entire face of the check looks to me as if it were written by Vaughan himself."

"Not if you scrutinize it closely," replied the detective. "However, I don't think the bank will be called upon to stand the loss. I want to know something about the appearance of the man when he was here. In short, anything that you may have to tell me about him."

"He was of middle age, I should say; with gray hair and mustache. He wore a monocle. He looked quite English. I think it was about ten minutes to three when he entered the bank."

"Was he alone?"

"No. Now that you call my attention to it, I recall that there was a lady with him. She seemed not well, or not strong, at least. She was seated while he transacted his business at the window. She wore a veil. I did not see her face. Will you tell me something more about the murder, Mr. Carter?"

"Vaughan was given a dose of prussic acid in a Martini cocktail, that is all. He had invited those two to luncheon with him, and the man killed him. I do not think it was done with the consent, or even with the foreknowledge, of the woman. And by the way——"

"Yes?"

"The afternoon papers will have it that it was a case of suicide. I prefer to have it remain so for the present. I suppose I can rely upon your discretion?"

"Most certainly."

"Thank you. I believe that is all."

"You hope, of course, to capture the murderer, Mr. Carter?"

"I *shall* capture him, Mr. Compton."

"I feel sorry for Vaughan's sister—Miss Mabel Vaughan. And that reminds me. She could not have known about this terrible affair at half-past seven o'clock last night."

"No?" said Nick quickly. "Why not?"

"Because I saw her at that time last evening—saw her and bowed to her."

"You did? Where was it that you saw her?"

"She was seated in an automobile with another lady. They were crossing Willis Avenue Bridge, going north. We were directly under an arc-light when we passed."

"Thank you," said Nick hastily. "Thank you—and good morning."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DRUGGED WOMAN IN THE TONNEAU.

The detective sent Hawkins back to the hotel where he worked, with instructions for him to be ready at any moment to come to him if he should be wanted; then he directed Danny to drive to his own house. He had been on the go all night, and he wanted a bath and a change of clothing.

But before he indulged in either he called up the Automobile Club of America, and told them there of the information that had been given him at the bank; that he had been told that the machine he was in search of had been seen crossing Willis Avenue Bridge at half-past seven the preceding evening.

Before he entered the house he told Danny to wait at the garage to take the Peerless; and he added:

"Clean her up and get her in good shape, Danny. I should not be surprised if there is a long run ahead of us, and I don't want any breakdowns. Be back here at the door with her in two hours, or as near that as you can. I should have some news by that time."

After that he went to his exercising-room—his "gym," as he called it—and stripped. Then he put on two heavy sweaters, spent fifteen minutes in swinging the clubs without a stop; then fifteen more in punching the bag; then he exercised on the rings for ten minutes, and then five more at the bag-punching.

By that time he was thoroughly warmed up, and, stripping off the sweaters, he got under the cold shower, and stood there until his skin was thoroughly cooled—and then he called Joseph to rub him down.

Later, when he was dressed, he ate a hearty breakfast, after which he smoked a cigar and looked over the morning papers.

It is, perhaps, needless to say that Patsy had occupied himself in much the same manner.

Chick and Ten-Ichi were neither of them at home. Chick, it appeared, had been called out on an old matter that morning. Joseph did not know where Ten-Ichi had gone.

It was half-past twelve when Danny brought the Peerless around again, and Nick sent him into the house to get his luncheon.

Just before it was time for them to start, a call came over the telephone from the A. A. A.

"Is that Mr. Carter?" asked the voice at the other end of the wire.

"Yes," replied the detective.

"The Stevens has just been spotted, Mr. Carter. It is now somewhere in the city of New York. I mean by that the Borough of Manhattan."

"Go ahead," said Nick. "Tell me all you know about it."

"You telephoned here a little while ago, while I was out, that the Stevens had been seen going north across Willis Avenue Bridge last night, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I called our nearest people to that place, and told them about it. It was my idea that she might be coming back this morning, and, sure enough, I was right."

"You say that the Stevens has crossed the bridge, coming this way?"

"Yes; and is now in the city somewhere."

"How long ago was that?"

"The man sent me word at once. It cannot be more than half an hour."

"Did he say how many people were in the car?"

"Only two."

"*Two!* Anything more about them?"

"A man and a woman; the woman alone in the tonneau. The man—evidently a chauffeur—driving."

"There is no doubt, you think, about the identity of the car?"

"None whatever. It fits the description you gave me; the numbers are the same, and it was a Stevens."

"I suppose there is no possibility of tracing it below that point, eh?"

"I am afraid not, Mr. Carter."

"Well, the hundred goes to the man who saw her as soon as I find out that there was no mistake. In the meantime, for further information concerning the car, the reward is doubled."

He hung up the receiver, and, calling Patsy, hastened outside to the Peerless car.

"Danny," he said, "let her slide up Fifth Avenue to the park, and after that keep slowly along the avenue." To himself he added: "There is just a possibility that we may meet that car—just a bare possibility."

But they did not meet it, although they went to 110th Street, and thence through to Second Avenue—the route which the other car would have been likely to follow in going down-town. But it occurred to Nick that he would find the man who had seen the car, and question him for himself, so he went into a drug-store and called up the A. A. A. again, to get his name and address.

It was a repair-shop and general headquarters, across the bridge, to which he was directed, and he had no difficulty in finding the man he sought.

"You telephoned in to the A. A. A. about that Stevens car I am searching for, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; an hour and a half ago, or more."

"I am the man who offered the reward for information about that car—which you will receive as soon as it is established that you have made no mistake."

"Oh, I didn't make any mistake. I can assure you of that. I saw the same car go past here last night, a little before eight, going the other way. I had only just heard that you were looking for it when I saw it returning."

"How many people were in the car when you saw it last night?"

"Three."

"How many were in it when you saw it to-day?"

"I reported that there were two; but I have since thought that possibly I was mistaken about that."

"Why do you think so?"

"I don't say that I do think so—but it is possible. I did not notice the car until it had got past me. I could then only see the back of it. My impression at the moment was that there were only two persons in the car, but since then I remember that I saw something which suggested that a second woman might have been leaning her head on the other woman's shoulder. In fact, that is what I now think."

"But why do you think so? What has happened since you saw the car to make you change your mind about the number of passengers it contained?"

"Well, I'll tell you. Come here, Bobby."

Bobby was one of the workmen about the place. The man continued:

"Bobby was coming across the bridge at the time, from the other side. He met the car at about the middle of the bridge. I asked him if he had seen it, and he said he had—*he noticed it because one of the women in the tonneau was asleep, or drunk, he thought. She had her head on the other woman's shoulder.*"

"Is that right, Bobby?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir."

"Could you see the features of either of the women?"

"No; they both wore veils."

"How about the man?"

"He had a red mustache. That is all I can tell you about him."

Nick turned to the man he had first addressed.

"You may call for that reward at any time you please," he said. "It is yours. That was the machine I am after. And now I'll tell you something."

"Yes, sir."

"If by any chance it should return this way—I don't think it will do so, but if it should—if you can take another machine and keep it in sight until it stops, and then telephone to my office—there is the number—your second reward will be anywhere from a hundred dollars up, depending upon how far you have to go and how much trouble you are up against."

"That is a bargain, sir, if only I happen to have a car here that is fast enough to keep up with it. That is a big Stevens. It's a powerful car."

"Well, that part of it is up to you. I don't much think it will return this way, but it may do so."

"And how long does this opportunity last? When do I cease to keep watch for the car?"

"When I tell you to do so."

"All right. That's a go. I have only to telephone to this number, eh?"

"Yes. Ask for Joseph. Give him your information. Tell him to send it to his master at once. That will be all."

"All right, sir. I'll keep watch. One of us will be at the door all the time, and I'll brush up my old Winton, and get her ready for the chase. She's a good car yet, for real hard work."

"Patsy," said the detective, when they were again running cityward, "one of us must return to Loyola Park at once, and I don't know whether to send you or to go myself."

"Send me," replied Patsy.

"The notion struck me," continued the detective, as if he had not heard, "the notion occurred to me the moment I knew that Mabel Vaughan was in that car, and probably drugged, that Bergen is up to one of his masterly, daredevil tricks—that he has doubled on his tracks, and is making directly for Loyola Park, as being the most unlikely place in the world where I would look for him."

Patsy nodded.

"It would be in keeping with other things he has done."

"I could tell you why he has decided to do it, too," continued the detective, still unheeding what Patsy said.

"Well?" said Patsy, when the detective paused, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

"If we go back to last night at six-thirty," said Nick, "we find Bergen waiting at the ferry at the foot of Thirty-fourth Street, for the arrival of Mabel—and with the stolen photograph with which to identify her. When she came off the boat, he doubtless stepped up to her, with the inquiry, 'Is this Miss Vaughan? Yes? Your brother sent me to fetch you;' and all that."

Patsy nodded. He knew that Nick was merely thinking aloud, and was not expecting any response to anything he said.

The detective continued:

"He considered himself secure with the new Stevens, and with his red mustache and the name of Perkins, and he continued to feel so until an hour later, when he crossed Willis Avenue Bridge."

"What had that to do with it?" asked Patsy.

"In crossing the bridge, he met and passed the cashier of the bank where he had had the fifty-thousand-dollar check cashed. He saw the banker, and recognized him; but he also saw that the banker recognized and bowed to Mabel Vaughan."

"I see."

"Now, Bergen is wise enough to know that I wouldn't be long in finding out about that check, and also about the abduction of Mabel. One goes with the other."

"That's sure."

"And so he instantly figured it out that the banker would tell me of having seen Mabel in the automobile, crossing the bridge, going north; and he also figured that I would instantly start off on a wild-goose chase to the northward—as I should have done only for that telephone-message.

"But the whole thing made him double on his tracks. He has thought that he saw a way to fool me, and now I believe that he will either go directly back to Loyola Park, to carry out some scheme he has in mind there—for he did not abduct Mabel for nothing—or that he will linger around near there until he considers it safe to change his base. On the whole, Patsy, I think we'll both go there right now."

CHAPTER X.

A SCHEMER'S MASTERLY PLOT.

The detective knew perfectly well that arrangements would not yet have been made for conveying the body of Clarence Vaughan to his home on Long Island.

The authorities would, of course, have insisted upon a post-mortem examination; after that would follow the embalming—and, in the absence of the sister, Vaughan's lawyer, to whom Nick had telephoned, would take charge of affairs.

He figured that, at the very best time that could be made, the body of Vaughan would not arrive at his home at Loyola Park before noon of the following day—and his earnest desire was to have Mabel Vaughan there to receive it when it did come.

The detective's previous experience with Melville Bergen* had taught him some of the resources of that daring criminal.

Nick knew that the man would stop at nothing to carry his ends, and he was such a daredevil in his villainy!

That was why the detective believed Bergen had not hesitated to take the girl he had abducted directly back to her home again, relying upon some power that he had

*See Nick Carter Weekly No. 547.

gained over her for security; and relying upon the very daring of his venture for safety.

Nick and his party made the trip by way of the Thirty-fourth Street Ferry, that being somewhat the shorter route. It was after one o'clock when they left the Willis Avenue Bridge; it was five when once again the big Peerless turned into the winding driveway that led up to the stately home of the Vaughans.

It was evident that Simpson had heard them coming, for when they drove under the porte-cochère, he was standing outside the door, to receive them.

"Oh, sir!" he cried out, when he recognized the detective, "I half-expected that it was you when I heard the motor coming. That is why I came to the door, sir. It is only an hour since Miss Mabel's return, and you can——"

"Since what?" demanded the detective.

"Since Miss Mabel came back to us."

"Simpson, do you mean to tell me that Miss Mabel is at home again?"

"Certainly, sir. Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I wouldn't say so if it were not true, would I?"

"She came home an hour ago, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is she well, Simpson?"

"Yes, sir; quite well—although terribly shocked at the news of her brother's death, of course, sir. Naturally, sir."

"Have you seen her—have you seen Mabel Vaughan with your own two eyes, Simpson?" demanded the detective. He could not understand this move at all.

"Assuredly, sir."

"Seen her and talked with her?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And there is nothing the matter with her?"

"Nothing whatever, sir, save, of course, the shock of the news she——"

"Never mind that. Do you mean to tell me that she came home perfectly well an hour ago, and that—— Where is she, Simpson?"

"She is resting just now in her room, sir."

"How did she get home when she came? Who brought her here?"

"She came in a motor with a friend, sir."

"Ah! With *two* friends, did she not?"

"No, sir. With one friend. A lady friend, sir. I don't know why you arsk me all these questions, sir."

"I ask them because I want them answered. Who is the friend who is with her? What is her name?"

"Miss Alden."

"Is she an old friend, perhaps, or a new one?"

"A very old friend indeed, sir."

"Do you happen to know that yourself, of your own knowledge, or was it told to you?"

"It is sufficient that I know it, sir."

"Simpson, you will answer my questions just as I ask them, or it will be the worse for you. I am in no mood for your high-and-mighty ideas of a butler's duty and a servant's loyalty. I believe your young mistress to be at this very moment in danger—in more danger, perhaps, than she was when she was abducted from under our noses last night. Now will you answer my questions as I ask them, or shall I take you to——"

"I will answer you, sir, to the best of my ability."

"Then reply to that last question of mine."

"What was it, sir, if you please?"

"Do you know if this Miss Alden is an old friend or a new friend—do you know it of your own knowledge, or were you told to say so?"

"I only know what Miss Mabel told me herself, sir."

"And what was that?"

"She said to me that Miss Alden was one of her oldest and dearest friends—schoolmates, they were, she said. Anyhow, sir, I don't see why Miss Alden should interest you. She is quite ill, sir."

"Oh, she is, eh Quite ill, is she? Since when has she been ill?"

"She was taken ill while they were on their way here, sir—she was taken in the car, I believe."

"Humph! And I suppose she was put to bed the moment they arrived; eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Miss Mabel say anything to you about that telegram she received yesterday afternoon, which purported to come from her brother Clarence?"

"I made bold to arsk her about that, sir."

"What did she say?"

"That it was a joke that some friends were trying to play on both of them."

"I don't understand, Simpson."

"Miss Alden's brother, who is a great joker, telegraphed to her in her brother's name, and also to her brother in her name, asking them both to go to a party he was giving out in Westchester County somewhere."

"Oh, I see. So this brother of Miss Alden telegraphed to Clarence at the same time he wired Mabel, did he? He certainly is a joker. By the way, was it this same Mr. Alden who brought Miss Mabel home this morning?"

"No, sir. It was the chauffeur."

"And where is he now? Where is the car?"

"He started back at once, sir; as soon as he had left the young ladies here. He had to take word of the illness of Miss Alden."

"Now, look here, Simpson; as you value your life and your honesty of purpose, do you *know* that it was Mabel Vaughan with whom you talked when the party arrived here an hour ago?"

"I was out, sir, at the moment of their arrival; but I know that it was she with whom I have talked since that time."

"Did you see her face? Did you see her features?"

"I heard her voice. It is the same thing, sir."

"Not by a long shot it isn't the same thing. How does it happen that you did not see her face?"

"Well, sir, I did see her face, in a way. That is, I saw it through her veil—just one of those gauzy white things with spots on it, you know, sir; and we were in the morning-room, where the light is rather obscure. But, sir, I can't see——"

"I don't want you to see just yet. I want you to answer questions. You say you were in the morning-room at the time. What were you doing in there? What was she doing in there?"

"If you must know, sir, she had just been told of the death of her brother. She had been sobbing—she was sobbing when I entered the room, and she pulled down her veil to hide the traces of it that were on her face, I suppose. I waited until she spoke to me."

"And then what did she say to you?"

"She was so choked that she could hardly speak at all, at first, sir; but she told me that she wished me to attend to everything for her. I was to communicate with Mr. Vaughan's lawyer, and do several other things. She also wished me to deny her to all callers, no matter who they might be, until she gave orders to the contrary. I think that is about all, sir."

"Simpson, I want you to go to your mistress—— No, I do not, either. Not just yet. I'll tell you what to do, Simpson: send Miss Vaughan's maid to me at once."

"I am afraid, sir, that it will be impossible. Miss Mabel sent her maid away only yesterday morning." The woman had not been honest. There are two new ones waiting now to be seen, each of whom hope for the situation."

"Did not one of the servants of the household attend upon your mistress when she came home an hour ago, or more?"

"Yes, sir. Susan Gross. She is not a lady's-maid, however. She only filled that capacity this once."

"Is she an old servant of the family, Simpson?"

"No, sir. She has been here about a month, however."

"That will suffice. Send her to me—or, rather, bring her to me. But wait a moment before you go."

"Yes, sir."

"When you found your mistress in the morning-room, sobbing, where was the other lady—where was Miss Alden?"

"Susan Gross was putting her to bed, sir."

"Very well. Now, I want you to send Susan Gross to me."

"I forgot to say that Susan said she had telephoned for a physician, and that the doctor is here now, with Miss Alden. It is something like heart-failure, they say."

"Indeed! So the doctor is here. I will interview him, also, after a little, I think. Now, send Susan Gross—or, rather, bring her here to me."

"Suppose she should refuse to come, sir?"

"Tell her that, in such a case, I will go to her, even if it is through locked doors."

All this conversation had taken place in the little reception-room off the main hall, into which Nick had forced the old man, in order to talk with him without being overheard. Outside, under the porte-cochère, Danny and Patsy were still seated in the automobile.

But now Nick stepped to the door, and beckoned to Patsy, and, drawing him into the room in which he had talked with Simpson, he said:

"I know the game now, Patsy, and I think, for the sake of carrying it out to a nice finish, I will let them have their heads for a little."

"How do you mean?" asked the young assistant.

"It is as I suspected. Bergen has brought Mabel directly back to her own home, but she is, or, at least, was, stupefied by some drug that the other two had given her. Imogene is probably about the height and figure

of Mabel, and their voices are not unlike. By exchanging clothing with their prisoner, Imogene, with the aid of a veil and by sobbing in order to further disguise her voice, has been able to impose upon the servants to the extent of passing herself off for Mabel, while Mabel, thickly veiled, of course, has been passed off upon them as a bosom friend of the young mistress—a certain, or, rather, uncertain, Miss Alden."

"But I don't see how——"

"How could it be accomplished without a confederate? It could not; but the confederate is here. Bergen must have long had this idea in mind, for it is as plain as a pikestaff to me that the Susan Gross for whom I have just sent is working for Bergen; and, also, *that Bergen is himself in the house at this very moment, in the character of a doctor who is in attendance upon the pseudo Miss Alden, who is ill.* Hush, now! Here comes Susan."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOMAN WITH THE CRUEL FACE.

Susan Gross entered the little room, followed by old Simpson.

She was a strange and rather a striking-looking woman. She had cold blue eyes, set very wide apart, under a low and rather bulging forehead. Her complexion was almost waxen in its dead whiteness. Her nose was straight, and her lips were thin and set tightly together. It was the face of a person whose nature was cruel, remorseless, determined. When she spoke it was in a low, rather musical voice. Altogether, she impressed Nick as being a woman to be on your guard against.

"You wished to see me, sir?" she inquired of Nick, and there was almost a sneer in the expression she gave to the question.

"Yes," replied the detective, assuming an easy tone, by which he wished to lull whatever suspicions she may have had concerning her. "I want some information concerning Miss Vaughan. Simpson tells me that she has quite naturally denied herself to everybody, being overcome by the shock of her brother's death."

"I think, sir, that she is bearing it very well," was the slow reply; and all the while those steely blue eyes were fixed immovably upon the detective.

"I suppose that Simpson has told you who I am?" asked Nick now.

"He has told me that you are Mr. Vaughan's friend."

"And has he not told you, also, that I am a detective by profession? That I am Nick Carter?"

"No. He did not tell me that." The eyes did not move so much as a lash.

"You know, I suppose, that I was here early this morning—at five o'clock—to bring the news of Mr. Vaughan's death, and that I was surprised to learn then that a bogus telegram, purporting to come from her brother, had been sent to her, and that she had gone? I would very much like to see her, to ask her about that telegram."

"I don't think she would consent to see you just now, sir; but I have heard her friend explain about the telegram. It was——"

"It was, I suppose, the same story that Simpson has told me already."

"I believe so. I think it was explained to Simpson."

"I am told that the young lady who came home with Miss Vaughan is quite ill; I hope it is not serious, Susan?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I am afraid it is quite serious," she said. "It is a weak heart. The doctor is with her now. He watches her every moment. He says that he dare not leave her; that she is likely to go off at any time."

"Do you think that the doctor would come to me here for just a moment, Susan?"

"I am positive, sir, that he would not. He dare not leave his patient. He has already had to resort to the use of nitroglycerin on the tongue twice, in order to keep her alive."

Nick could have choked the woman for her glib lying; but he kept a smile on his face, pretending to be deceived, even though the words of the woman had already uncovered a more horrible plot than ever to him.

"I must hasten back to New York at once, Susan," he said, speaking rapidly. "Will you go to your mistress, and ask her if there is any service that I can do for her there? I shall probably return here again some time to-morrow."

"I will ask her," was the reply, and Susan glided from the room.

The instant she disappeared, Nick stepped forward and seized Simpson by the shoulders, and pulled him forward until he could whisper into the old man's ear:

"Simpson," he whispered rapidly, "if you would save

the life of your young mistress, obey what I tell you now. Her life hangs only by a slender thread. They mean to murder her as they murdered her brother, but we will save her if you will do exactly as I tell you. Will you do it?"

"I will, sir. I will."

"Step outside the door, Patsy, and cough when you see Susan returning. Now, Simpson."

"Yes, sir."

"What time do you lock up the house at night?"

"At ten, when there is nobody here but ourselves."

"There is a side door upon the lawn, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir. From the entry back of the library."

"*Leave that door unlocked to-night.* See to it yourself that it *is* unlocked when you retire. And when you go to bed, keep your clothes on; only put out your light. Obey me in this if you value the life of Mabel Vaughan."

"I will, sir, most certainly."

Patsy coughed outside the door, and Nick turned his back to Simpson, and stood looking out at the window when Susan entered.

"Miss Vaughan's compliments, sir," she said in her evenly modulated voice. "She can think of nothing that you can do more than will occur to yourself in regard to the care of the body of her brother. She is very grateful to you, sir."

"Very good," replied Nick. "Say to her that I will return some time to-morrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Good-by, Simpson. Is there anything that I could do for you, old chap?"

"Thank you, sir; no."

Nick passed out at the door then, followed by Patsy; and while Simpson and Susan stood in the great doorway of the house, in plain hearing, he said aloud, but not too loud:

"Home, Danny, and make good time if you can."

The big Peerless glided away along the winding road to the main thoroughfare, and turned its beacons toward the city; and it was not until they had gone several miles that Nick ordered Danny to slow down.

"Keep right along the way you are going, Danny, only not quite so fast," said the detective. "It would not surprise me if Bergen should get out the Stevens from the place where he has it concealed, and follow us long enough to assure himself that I do intend to go to New York. Have you got a good supply of gasoline, Danny?"

"Plenty, sir."

"Well, you can go straight ahead, as if you were bound for New York, at an easy gait, for two hours and a half. Then we will cross to the other road, and return to Loyola Park at a little better clip. I want to be back there soon after ten, and I want to leave the car far enough away from the residence so that nobody there will hear it, even if they are listening. I am going inside that house to-night, Patsy, and I'm going to catch them red-handed. I have run up against some devilish plots in my time, but this pretty nearly takes the cake."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"I can see through the whole game now."

"What is it, chief?"

"Imogene is already posing as Mabel Vaughan, but she is keeping herself secluded from the sight of any of the servants who would know her. Her grief gives her a good excuse for that, don't you see?"

"Yes."

"She has given orders, in the name of the woman whose part she is playing, that she cannot receive anybody at all. In the meantime, Susan Gross, who is in her employ, waits upon her, and is, of course, sponsor for her, so far as the other servants are concerned. Even old Simpson was fooled."

"I see."

"To-morrow the body of Clarence will be taken home. If nothing happened to-night—as there will—but if nothing happened to-night, Imogene would order everybody out of the way while she descended to view the remains of her supposed brother. She would lean on the arm of Susan, and she would have an attack of hysteria while in the room with the body, so that Susan and the doctor who is attending the supposed Miss Allen would have to assist her to her room again; and that doctor, as I have told you, is Bergen."

"Yes."

"The following day would be the day of the funeral. Miss Vaughan would be so prostrated that she could not attend. She would still keep out of sight behind that screen of grief and illness. Understand?"

"Yes."

"It would be the same the day after the funeral, and the week after the funeral. She would still be very ill; still refuse herself to all callers—to everybody. And then, one by one the old servants would be dismissed. Only one by one, in order to arouse no suspicion. Old

Simpson would doubtless be the very last one to go, but he would have to go like the others, or he would be put out of the way by a sudden illness."

"I understand what you mean now."

"When the old servants were all replaced by new ones, who have never seen Miss Vaughan, she would show herself to a few of them, but she would still refuse to see all callers; and then she would suddenly disappear for a trip abroad—from which she would not return for many years, if ever. *But, my dear boy, she would have all the millions of Clarence Vaughan, and of Mabel Vaughan, as well.*"

"Do you mean, chief, that they are going to dare to try to murder Mabel Vaughan there in her own house?"

"I mean that Mabel Vaughan, now supposed by those in the house to be a Miss Alden, is reported to be suffering from heart-failure; and so severely that already they have been obliged to give her nitroglycerin, the greatest heart-stimulant that is known, and the quickest in action."

"Well?"

"If we were not here to interfere with their plans to-night, Mabel Vaughan, as Miss Alden, would pass away some time to-morrow—probably about the time, or soon after, the arrival of the body of Clarence Vaughan at his home."

"Good Heaven!"

"And there would be a double prostration for the scheming Imogene."

"What a plot!"

"Yes. What a plot. Devilish, isn't it? And I have said that Imogene was a woman of good impulses."

"She can't have very many of them left if she has consented to such a hellish scheme as this one is."

Nick was silent for a long time after that, but at last he said:

"Finding herself a confederate in that first crime must have made a fiend of the woman, after all. Well, anyhow, I believe we will be in time; and we have got them nicely rounded up, Patsy."

"I wish you would tell me, chief, why you did not sail right in and arrest the outfit while we were there?"

"Because one or two of them would have gotten away, and I don't want that. Don't forget that there are three whom we want now, for the woman Susan counts now as much as the others, and I am not sure but that she is the brains of all their plotting. She is a bleached-out likeness of Melville Bergen, and I should not be surprised to learn that she is his sister. I want her, too; and if I had sailed in, as you expressed it, this afternoon—well, it was not what I wished to do—although I ran a great risk in the delay."

"What risk?"

"I risked the life of Mabel Vaughan."

"You mean——"

"I mean that they may decide to do away with her before the body of Clarence gets there, and, in that case, they would put her to death some time to-night."

"Hadn't we better turn back now, chief?"

"We cannot enter the house until after ten o'clock."

But after they had driven on a few miles farther, Nick gave the order to about ship, and they were soon driving back again for one of the strangest of midnight adventures that are recorded in Nick Carter's books.

CHAPTER XII.

A CRIMINAL'S CONFESSION.

It was eleven o'clock when Nick Carter, followed by Patsy and Danny, approached the side-door of the mansion—the door referred to as leading to the lawn from an entry behind the library.

Simpson had been faithful to his promise. It was not fastened, and as the detective opened it softly, Simpson rose, like a wraith, in front of them. The old man had not been content to retire; he had returned, to wait for their coming.

The detective was rather startled to see him there, but the old man placed his fingers to his lips, and then motioned for them to follow him.

He tiptoed his way along the dimly lighted hall, and thence up the wide stairway to the second floor; and then again along the corridor, until they came to a narrower one which crossed it.

Here he softly opened a door, and pointed silently into a darkened room.

Nick stepped forward across the threshold, and at once he could hear the droning of voices from a room which was beyond that one.

He returned again into the hallway, and pulled the door partly shut behind him.

"Tell me the plan of these two rooms," he whispered to Simpson.

"This is merely a small anteroom to the larger one beyond it. This room is never used any more at all. Miss

Mabel always preferred to use the doorway into the larger room from the main corridor. Beyond it is Miss Mabel's sitting-room, and beyond that is her bedroom. There is only a curtain between this anteroom and the sitting-room, and another between the sitting-room and the bedroom. They are all in there, in the sitting-room, now, and you can hear them plainly from this room. I have been listening here for half an hour, when I knew it was time for you to arrive, and went down to meet you."

Nick made a gesture to his two companions to follow him, and then he passed inside the anteroom.

He crossed the room to the curtain that has already been mentioned, and to say that he was astounded by what he saw when he pulled aside an edge of the curtain, to peer beyond it, does not express the emotions he felt.

There were four persons in that brilliantly lighted room.

Melville Bergen was there, divested of all disguise. He was seated in a Morris chair, leaning idly back, smoking a cigar.

Mabel Vaughan was there—but she was stretched upon a couch in a corner of the room, beyond where Bergen was seated; and she was apparently sleeping. At all events, she was unconscious. The horrible thought came to the detective in that instant that she might be already dead, but the conversation he overheard speedily reassured him on that point.

Susan Gross was there. She sat rather stiffly in an ordinary chair beside Bergen, and her pale face looked ghostly in that light; but her face was as expressionless as it had been in the afternoon, save that there was a baleful glitter in her pale-blue eyes.

Imogene Mallory, or Mrs. Bergen, was there, also; and it was the condition in which he saw her that had so astounded the detective.

She was seated in another Morris chair, facing her husband; *but she was tied to it so that she could not rise.* Otherwise, she was free to move her hands and feet. She looked very beautiful, and also calmly disdainful; also thoroughly defiant. It was at once evident to the detective that one of her good impulses was getting in its work.

The first sentence that he overheard, as he entered the room and pulled aside the edge of the curtain, was spoken by Melville Bergen, who said:

"It is up to you, Clarita Imogene"—he spoke with the greatest calmness; "if you refuse to carry out the scheme as I have arranged it, you simply die in the place of that young woman there; that is all. We can just as well bury you as Miss Alden, as we can bury her as Miss Alden; and if you won't play the game out, you'll have to assume the part."

Imogene's reply was almost as calmly made as his statement.

"I shall not change the position I have taken," she said. "You may murder me, if you will—it will only be anticipating matters, anyway, for I expect that you will do it some day, in any event—but I will not give my consent to the murder of that girl, and I will not be a party to it."

Bergen shrugged his shoulders and gnawed the ends of his mustache first one and then the other.

"You're a fool," he said, still speaking with calmness. "At all events, I am not a murderer—and I will not become one."

"You are as guilty of the killing of Clarence Vaughan as I am, and you know it," he retorted.

"I know that you could easily make it appear so—yes. I am aware that Nick Carter and others think so at this minute; but Heaven knows better, and that suffices for me now. I would never have gone to his apartment to meet you there if I had supposed you meditated any such act, and you know *that*. You understand as well as I do, Birge, that I had no idea of what was going to happen till Clarence dropped forward over the table, dead."

"Well, what of it? You were there, and you were a part of the game. You will have to take the consequences, along with me, if we are ever caught."

"I know that. But my conscience is clear of any intent to commit the crime. I have only helped to shield you since then. I am what the lawyers call an accomplice after the fact."

"But what is the use of your kicking over the traces now, after everything is done and when it is all plain sailing ahead of us?"

"I will go ahead with the game, as you call it, Birge, only on one condition; and that condition I have already told you."

"But how are we to carry it out without getting rid of that girl?"

"I don't know. That is for you to determine."

"Have you forgotten that there is at least seven millions in this for us three?"

"No."

"Think of it! Seven millions!"

"I have thought of it."

"All you have to do is to keep yourself secluded until the first business has blown over, and until the servants can be changed. Then off you go to Europe, and all these millions fall into your hands, like fruit from a tree. Why——"

"Let Mabel Vaughan continue to live, and give me proof that she does live, and I will do my part. Otherwise, I will have nothing to do with it."

"Then you go up the flume yourself, that's all!"

"I have already told you, Birge, that it will only be anticipating by a few years the fate that I know will befall me. If you do not kill me yourself, this hideous sister of yours, whom I hate and despise, will do it for you."

Susan Gross rose slowly from her chair, and stepped forward until she stood directly over the girl who was fastened in her chair.

"I assure you, Imogene," she said coldly, while her baleful eyes glittered like the eyes of a snake, "that nothing would give me greater joy than to choke you now until you were black in the face, and until you were dead; *but*—you may still be useful to us."

"Go ahead with your killing, then, Susan Birge, or Gross, if you prefer that name. I haven't much to live for now, anyway. I would as soon be dead as not. Until Birge murdered Clarence, I believed I loved him; but since that moment I have hated him. If either of you do one more single thing to harm that girl over there, I will have nothing more to do with you, or with your plans."

Bergen rose lazily from his chair, and peremptorily ordered his sister back to her place. Then he said:

"We will try what a little torture will do for you, my dear. I threatened you once with hot irons; I think I will try an application of them now."

He took a jack-knife from one of his pockets, and, opening the largest of the blades, he stepped forward and held the steel in the gas-jet.

"I shall brand your forehead and spoil your beauty for you, Imogene," he said to her, while he held the blade in the flame, waiting for it to get hot; and he laughed when he saw her shudder.

"More afraid of that than you are of death, are you not, my dear?" he jeered at her; but he did not see that the curtain at the end of the room had been pulled aside, and that Nick Carter had stepped through into the room behind him.

Neither did his sister see the detective, for she, too, was watching the process of heating the blade which was to sear away the beauty of the woman she hated.

And then, of a sudden, Bergen felt the wrist which he was holding high in the air, in order to reach the gas flame with his blade—felt it seized in a mighty grasp; felt it drawn backward and bent the "wrong way," and the next instant he was flung bodily high in the air, so that his feet almost touched the ceiling—flung over the shoulder of the detective, and hurled to the floor like the lash of a whip.

None of them had seen the approach of the detective, or of his companions who were with him; but it seemed as if instantly Susan Gross realized what had happened, for, with a scream of fury, she leaped forward full upon Imogene, bound to the chair, as if she were determined to wreak vengeance upon her, at all events.

But in this she was foiled, also; for Patsy was there before her talonlike fingers could seize upon the throat of the helpless girl, and he whirled her around and snapped handcuffs upon her wrists before she could do anything to resist him.

And, in the meantime, Nick, with the assistance of Danny, had thoroughly pinioned the arms of Melville Bergen, who was, nevertheless, still unconscious from the effects of the fall that Nick Carter had given him.

It is only necessary to add that Mabel Vaughan was quickly restored to consciousness after her own family physician was sent for and arrived on the scene.

Three persons—Nick Carter, his assistant Patsy, and his chauffeur Danny—had heard the confession of Bergen that he was guilty of the murder of Clarence Vaughan; and the same three had heard Imogene's statement that she was only guilty after the fact.

It is enough to say that Bergen was brought to a speedy trial, convicted, and sentenced, and that ultimately he paid the penalty of his crimes in the electric chair.

But Mabel Vaughan's life and fortune were saved, even though her brother had been sacrificed.

THE END.

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